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Children of incarcerated parents and the role of the elementary school counselor

Abstract

Of the 72 million minor children in the United States, 2 million of those have a parent who is currently incarcerated. The dynamics of a child's life are greatly altered when a parent is incarcerated, and many children struggle as a result. Without some form of support or intervention, they are five times more likely than other children to become incarcerated themselves. Elementary school counselors must be aware of the characteristics of children of incarcerated parents, while working to address their needs across numerous levels and contexts.

CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS AND THE ROLE
OF THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELOR

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by

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December 2005

This research paper by: Megan A. Petersen

Entitled: CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS AND THE ROLE OF
THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELOR

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Education.

8-30-05

Date Approved

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8/31/05

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Of the 72 million minor children in the United States, 2 million of those have a parent who is currently incarcerated. The dynamics of a child's life are greatly altered when a parent is incarcerated, and many children struggle emotionally, academically, psychologically, economically, and socially as a result. Without some form of support or intervention, children of incarcerated parents are five times more likely than other children to become incarcerated themselves.

Elementary school counselors must be aware of the characteristics of children of incarcerated parents, while working to address their needs across numerous levels and contexts.

Parental crime, arrest, and incarceration have profound effects on children. Timmons (2005) described how “children living with the devastation and trauma of having an incarcerated parent are often the hidden, silent children in our schools” (p. 1). Incarceration levels are increasing by 6 percent each year (Kester-Smith, 2002) and elementary school counselors will likely encounter children of offenders on a regular basis. The impact of living with the arrest and incarceration of a parent is devastating for children and their families. Economic, social, and emotional burdens are placed often placed on children of prisoners, who also frequently suffer emotional and behavioral difficulties (Timmons, 2005). Counselors must identify these children, recognize their needs, and “develop a vision that will empower these children to become successful adults” (Timmons, 2005, p. 1). Therefore, it is imperative that elementary school counselors are familiar with the demographics, background information, experiences, and characteristics of these children (Johnston, 1995).

The purpose of this paper is to increase awareness about children of incarcerated parents, present knowledge about their demographics, research the impact incarceration has on them, examine the special characteristics of these children, and provide information on the elementary school counselor’s role when working with children of incarcerated parents. By having knowledge about children of incarcerated parents, elementary school counselors will have a strong foundation for working effectively with this ever-growing population.

Demographics and Background Information about

Children of Incarcerated Parents

Population Size

Data on children of incarcerated parents is difficult to access, though the number of children of incarcerated parents in the United States has been estimated around 2 million (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Since 1991, the number of minor children with a parent in prison rose by over 500,000 (Mazza, 2002; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). In the United States today, over 750,000 African-American children, 400,000 Caucasian children, and 300,000 Latino children have a parent who is incarcerated (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). As a result, an estimated 336,300 households with minor children have been affected (Timmons, 2005). In addition, Mansour (2003) reported there are more children with an incarcerated parent than there are children with diabetes, AIDS, and cerebral palsy combined.

Statistics

It is estimated that most children of incarcerated parents (75% of children of incarcerated fathers and 89% of children of incarcerated mothers) are less than 12 years of age. With regard to the gender of a child of an incarcerated parent, 52% are girls, while 48% are boys. In addition, the children are more likely to be African-American (43%) than any other race or origin (Wright & Seymour, 2000).

Parent gender is another major statistic relevant to incarceration; 90% of incarcerated parents are fathers. However, between 1990 and 1999, there was a 98% increase in the number of incarcerated mothers (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). In addition, Drummond (2000) reported the population of women in U.S. prisons has risen 650% in the past two decades. Of the more than 149,000 females inmates currently in jails and prisons, 70% have at least one child under 18.

Characteristics of Children of Incarcerated Parents

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Until recently, children of incarcerated parents were not recognized as a specific group with special characteristics and needs. At times, they were “a forgotten population, their special needs inadequately understood or addressed” (Wright & Seymour, 2000, p. 17). One way of looking at the needs of these children is to refer to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. According to Gawel (1997), Maslow developed a hierarchy of needs in which there is a pattern of needs, recognition, and satisfaction people follow in generally the same sequence. According to this theory, a person could not recognize or pursue the next higher need in the hierarchy until his/her currently recognized need was substantially or completely satisfied. Maslow’s hierarchy begins at level one, which is physiological needs such as thirst and hunger. Level two is safety needs such as security, stability, and protection. Examples of love and belongingness, which is level three in Maslow’s hierarchy, are to escape loneliness, love and be loved, and

gain a sense of belonging, affection, and identification. Level four is esteem, such as self-respect, and the respect of others. The highest level in Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization, which is fulfilling one's potential (Gawel, 1997).

All human beings attempt to meet their needs and the needs of their children as Maslow described. The family and child of incarcerated parents may need to re-examine their level one physiological needs, especially if an incarcerated parent provided financial support for the whole family. In addition, when a member of the family is removed, children often feel a loss of Maslow's level two need for safety and security. The elementary school counselor could work with the family and teacher to re-establish a sense of safety for these children. The level three need of love and belonging will also need to be restructured in conjunction with the children's physiological and safety needs. Johnston (1995) reported that children who have a parent in jail spend a lot of time contending with feelings of anxiety, shame, sadness, grief, social isolation, and guilt. Therefore, it is crucial that families, elementary school counselors, and other adults help children of incarcerated parents deal with these feelings before they look for love and belonging through risky behaviors such as abusive relationships or gang-related activity (Gawel, 1997).

Dynamics

Mazza (2002) found that children of incarcerated parents are a highly complex, yet fragile population. These children frequently appear angry or sullen,

yet are extremely sensitive and unconsciously waiting to be abandoned and disappointed again. As a result of having their trust and security shaken, children of incarcerated parents are often well-defended against further possible hurts and may be suspicious of anyone who initially appears caring (Mazza, 2002).

According to Mazza (2002), there is a self-fulfilling dynamic/prophecy with the children of incarcerated parents. These children often lack self-esteem and feel guilty and responsible in some way for their parent's incarceration. Often times they view themselves as problematic, and this sense of badness can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading these children to illegal behavior. This helps to explain the statistic that children of incarcerated parents are five times more likely to be incarcerated than other children (Mazza, 2002).

Another dynamic children of incarcerated parents face is the fact all children both consciously and unconsciously use their parents as role models, and studies consistently find that children are apt to repeat the life experiences of their parents. According to Mazza (2002), this is true of children of incarcerated parents; without appropriate intervention, many of these children will duplicate their parents' choices and lifestyles.

Risk Factors

In understanding the characteristics of children of incarcerated parents, it is vital to look at their experiences both before and during the incarceration. Wright and Seymour (2000) reported on some of the risk factors children of

incarcerated parents experience both before and during incarceration: poverty, alcohol and other drugs, crime, intrafamilial violence, child maltreatment, previous separations, parent's history of abuse, enduring trauma, and arrest and incarceration. With regard to previous separations, Wright and Seymour (2000) asserted that children of incarcerated parents may have experienced previous separations from their parent, and this period of incarceration may just represent one more separation. However, elementary school counselors must remember that an ongoing pattern of instability leaves children highly vulnerable in all arenas of their lives. In addition, enduring trauma describes the multiple and ongoing traumatization some children experience throughout several life stages, with no recovery time or supportive resources between traumas (Wright & Seymour, 2000). Again, this is an area where elementary school counselors can intervene and work to meet the traumatic needs of children of incarcerated parents.

Impact and Effect of Parental Incarceration on Children

Despite the limitations in knowledge of this population, there is a beginning body of knowledge about some of the consequences of having a parent in prison. Timmons (2005) reported that children who have incarcerated parents suffer a specific form of grief and loss from having a parent who is alive, yet unreachable. In addition, it is important to remember the impact on children of having a parent in jail depends on several variables including the age at which the separation occurs, the length of the separation, the health of the family, the nature

of the parent's crime, the availability of family or school support, and the degree of stigma associated with the incarceration (Timmons, 2005).

Time of Arrest

The arrest of parents may result in trauma for the children. If children are present during the arrest, Mazza (2002) discussed how they witness the "criminalization" of their parent, which includes "seeing parents handcuffed, read their rights, and taken away in police cars" (p. 522). Such trauma can be equal to seeing a parent assaulted (Mazza, 2002). On the other hand, if a child is not present during the time of arrest, the parent has suddenly disappeared and they experience a sense of abandonment. According to Mazza (2002), children tend to internalize this confusion and sense of abandonment and may blame themselves for their parent's disappearance.

Developmental Effects

Based on a child's developmental stage, Johnston (1995) identified the effects of parental crime, arrest, and incarceration on children. In the infancy stage (0-2 years), the child of an incarcerated parent would have impaired parent-to-child bonding. During early childhood (2-6 years), children of incarcerated parents may have inappropriate separation anxiety, other developmental regression, impaired development of initiative, acute traumatic stress reactions, and possibly survivor guilt. By middle childhood (7-10 years), children may begin to develop a poor self-concept as a result of parental incarceration, and continue

to struggle with developmental regressions. In addition, children in middle childhood may have acute traumatic stress reactions, trauma-reactive behaviors, and impaired ability to overcome future trauma (Johnston, 1995). As a result of these effects, the elementary school counselor may see children of incarcerated parents struggling to work and get along with others, achievement in school, and controlling emotions.

Children's Reactions

Wright and Seymour (2000) compiled a list of children's general and specific reactions to parental incarceration, including the physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions that have been noted in children of incarcerated parents. According to Wright and Seymour (2000), children experience identification with the incarcerated parent and develop an awareness of the social stigma surrounding incarceration. Johnston and Gabel (1995) reported that children often experience a change in their future orientation after a parental incarceration, and may have intrusive thoughts about their parents. Emotionally, children tend to experience embarrassment, anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, guilt, low self-esteem, depression, resentment, and emotional withdrawal (Kampfner, 1995; Block & Potthast, 1998). Behavioral reactions in children of incarcerated parents include physical aggression, hyper-arousal, attention disorders, truancy, antisocial behaviors, disruptive school and classroom behaviors, sleeplessness, bed wetting, refusal to eat, and early crime involvement

(Wright & Seymour, 2000). A child's feelings may spring from thoughts and behaviors may result from feelings; therefore, a child's reactions to parental incarceration are interconnected.

Visitation

Contact between an incarcerated parent and their child is frequently very difficult. Prisons are often located in remote, rural locations, and 60% of incarcerated parents are in prisons more than 100 miles away from their last place of residence (Mansour, 2003). Drummond (2000) described how "in-person visits can take an emotional toll on young children...they must endure invasive body searches just like adults...once inside the noisy visiting rooms, kids frequently have to shout at the top of their lungs" (p. 107). In most state and federal prisons, children are allowed to hug and kiss their parent. However, in jails where the parent is awaiting trial and sentencing, contact is forbidden and a pane of thick glass separates the mother and child (Drummond, 2000). Visiting an incarcerated parent may be confusing and traumatic for children.

Goals and Risk/Protective Factors

The goals of the elementary school counselor when working with children of incarcerated parents are to "provide children the support systems necessary to overcome the trauma and instability of having a parent in prison; teach children the necessary skill development to triumph over days filled with unspoken fear, uncertainty of the future, and inner suffering and shame; and help children expand

their inner strength...” (Timmons, 2005, p. 2). In addition, counselors can play a role in helping children conquer risk factors involved in having an incarcerated parent and expand the child’s protective factors and resiliency needed to live a productive life (Timmons, 2005).

According to Timmons (2005), there are both risk factors and protective factors to consider when working with children of incarcerated parents. Risk factors are “those personal and environmental factors placing a child at higher threat of negative behaviors and substance abuse. Protective factors are those personal and environmental factors that help reduce the risk of substance abuse and other negative behaviors” (Timmons, 2005, p. 2). Within the school environment, elementary school counselors can positively impact children of incarcerated parents by identifying the risk factors early and working hard to develop the protective factors, giving these students hope, encouragement, and love (Timmons, 2005).

Developmental Assets – Asset Building

One way school counselors can contribute to the healthy development of children of incarcerated parents is by recognizing and building on their developmental assets. According to Benson, Galbraith, and Espeland (1998), developmental assets are good things children need in their lives and within themselves, giving them the support, skills, and resources they will need to get where they want to go. With the asset approach, children of incarcerated parents

will focus on what is right with them and what they have to offer; they will build character, skills, and values that help prevent problems; they will learn about hope and that positive change is possible; and they will celebrate successes and good news.

External Assets

It is within the school counselor's role to work with children of incarcerated parents on building the following external assets: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Support is about having people in the child's life who love, care for, appreciate, and accept them. Empowerment is about a child's need to feel valued and valuable. School counselors can foster this through respecting the child and helping the child feel safe. More so than other youth, children of incarcerated parents may be lacking boundaries and expectations – clear rules, consistent consequences for breaking rules, and encouragement to do their best. School counselors can work to build this asset through clearly defining the counseling relationship, collaborating with teachers as a means to best meet the student's needs, and being a constant support for the child. A child who is part of a family system wrought with incarceration is likely to feel alone and isolated. The final external asset, constructive use of time, is based on the fact children need opportunities to learn and develop new skills and interests with other youth and adults. To develop this asset, school counselors can form support groups for children whose parents have been arrested or

imprisoned or find a positive role model (e. g., a high school buddy or Big Brother/Big Sister) to pair with the elementary student (Timmons, 2005).

Internal Assets

In addition to the external assets developed by the Search Institute and Benson, Galbraith, and Espeland (1998), children also need the following internal assets, which are the values and skills they develop to guide themselves: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. Most children of incarcerated parents are likely to lack knowledge and skills in all these areas as a result of having a poor or no parental role model. When a child has a parent who is incarcerated, the child may have no sense of the lasting importance of learning or a belief in their own abilities. School counselors can step in, reinforcing the importance of gaining knowledge at school and how that will help the child in building a positive, successful future. The positive values asset deals with a child's need to develop strong guiding values/principles to help them make healthy life choices. With regard to this asset, school counselors can reach a child with an incarcerated parent at the classroom, small group, or individual level, addressing personal values or values clarification while modeling positive life values. Social competencies helps children needing skills to interact effectively with others, make difficult decisions, and cope with new situations. Elementary school counselors can teach and model appropriate and effective social skills for these children, while being a strong support system for

them while dealing with new situations during this rough period in their life.

Positive identity is the belief that all children need to believe in their own self-worth and feel they have control over the things that happen to them. Elementary school counselors can help children of incarcerated parents build this asset and their self-esteem by reaffirming their own value and worth separate from that of their incarcerated parent (Timmons, 2005).

The Elementary School Counselor's Role

When working with a child of an incarcerated parent, the elementary school counselor is working from a responsive position rather than a preventative role. School counseling programs are based on four components and in the school setting, the responsive services component is often associated with crisis management. Having a parent incarcerated and the family disruption that follows would be an example of an interpersonal crisis (Cobia & Henderson, 2003). Cobia and Henderson (2003) described how in working with children of incarcerated parents, school counselors could utilize a solution-focused model to "help students identify and use their strengths to create differences in their lives" (p. 134). In the responsive services role, elementary school counselors can help these children develop their coping skills and work to move beyond the problem as they grow and mature.

Skill Development

Timmons (2005) reported on several strategies for helping children of incarcerated parents build these coping skills. First of all, elementary school counselors must facilitate the child's acceptance of the tragedy. The school counselor can acknowledge the incarceration with the child and take time to help them process their grief. Empathize with the children and be real to them, not above them. Let children know they have the ability to deal with life's problems, while guiding them in analyzing the problem. This could take the form of having the child write the problem on a sheet of paper and listing emotions attached to the statement. Children of incarcerated parents often have low self-esteem, so it would be an appropriate place for the elementary school counselor to work on building the child's self-confidence. This could take the form of acknowledging their strengths through an activity such as writing each letter of their first name vertically on a sheet of paper, then writing a word that describes a personal positive quality next to each corresponding letter. In situations like these, it would be appropriate for the elementary school counselor to help the child live one day at a time, reducing the big picture to small, obtainable pieces. For example, the counselor could help the child create a positive vision for the future, encouraging the child to believe in the fulfillment of each and every one of their dreams (Timmons, 2005). An example of an activity tied to this idea would be to share Helen Keller or David Pelzer's stories of triumph in the face of adversity.

Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights

On the individual counseling level, the elementary school counselor can also utilize the Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights with these children. Developed by the San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents (2003), the bill of rights was written out of the belief that the children's perspective was the logical framework from which all future work should evolve. The bill of rights consists of eight statements, and the elementary school counselor can definitely use these statements as a starting point in working with this population. The Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights' statements are as follows: I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest; I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me; I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent; I have the right to be well cared for in my parent's absence; I have the right to speak with, see, and touch my parent; I have the right to support as I struggle with my parent's incarceration; I have the right not to be judged, blamed, or labeled because of my parent's incarceration; and I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent ("San Francisco," 2003, p. 1).

The elementary school counselor can definitely play a role in a number of these rights. For example, right 6 is the right to have support during a parent's incarceration. The school counselor is trained to meet these children's unique needs, such as dealing with repeated loss, a heightened fear of authority, and

difficulty in forming trusting relationships (“San Francisco,” 2003). In addition, right 5 and right 8 deal with maintaining a relationship with a parent when they are incarcerated. The elementary school counselor can facilitate this for children by encouraging and helping them compose letters or poems for their parent, and then taking on the responsibility of mailing them to the parent.

Children of Incarcerated Parents Support Group

Another intervention elementary school counselors could utilize with this population is to form a children of incarcerated parents support group. This could be a multi-age group, comprised of 6-8 students from both genders. Landy (1990) identified objectives of such a group: “to encourage open discussion about parents who are in prison, to clarify and accept one’s feelings about having a parent in prison, to share concerns and situations which arise from being a child of an incarcerated parent, to practice appropriate ways of expressing emotions, and to strengthen one’s self-concept” (p. 41).

Landy (1990) designed a six session group format, allowing 30-45 minutes for each session. Each session has a group discussion theme, and most of the sessions use concepts from Robert Burch’s book, *Queenie Peavy*. Topics Landy (1990) suggested addressing include similarities between group members and Queenie, how each member would like to change the situation if possible, what it feels like to be teased by peers, various ways of releasing anger without hurting anyone, the necessity of dealing with anger, the worries each member has

about or for the parent that is incarcerated, and some things each group member can be proud of. Landy (1990) also included a number of activities: drawing a picture of the incarcerated parent and surrounding them with feeling words that describe that person, making a list of the child's worries, designing a poster with words and pictures that depict what each member is proud of, or, as a closing activity, writing a letter/drawing a picture to send to the parent in jail.

Classroom Guidance

With regard to children of incarcerated parents, elementary school counselors have a few other roles they can assume. Across all elementary grade levels, the elementary school counselor could utilize classroom guidance lessons as another means by which to reach out to children of incarcerated parents. As noted before, children of incarcerated parents experience a wide range of emotions, such as anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, and guilt (Kampfner, 1995; Block & Potthast, 1998). As an indirect way of addressing these feelings, while also serving all students in the classroom, the elementary school counselor could utilize bibliotherapy in a guidance lesson and read Dr. Seuss' *My Many Colored Days*. The goals of this type of lesson would be to assist all children in recognizing they may have "mixed up" days and to help children recognize and utilize strategies to combat "down" moods and/or days. Both of these goals would apply to all children in a classroom, but especially target those children of incarcerated parents who are more likely to be experiencing difficulties and may

have a higher need for strategies to assist them through depressed and confused feelings.

An example of another guidance lesson to use in a classroom where there is a child of an incarcerated parent would be “Validations” (Schwallie-Giddis, Cowan, and Schilling, 1993, p. 47). This lesson helps students appreciate themselves and others, regardless of outside life situations. After explaining, leading a discussion about, and brainstorming validations, the counselor would instruct students to tape a sheet of paper to each others’ backs. Then, the students would think of something positive and sincere to communicate to all the other students. However, instead of saying this validation to the other person’s face, the students would use a pen and write it on the person’s back. After the students have finished writing, give the students a few minutes to remove the papers from their backs and read the comments that people have written. The counselor could then lead a discussion with the children about how it felt to validate others, what it felt like to be validated, and so on. Children of incarcerated parents often have lowered self-esteem and this type of guidance could target that area of their life.

Another guidance lesson would be to read Jacqueline Woodson’s *Visiting Day*. This book, written for children of elementary school age, is about a special day each month when the narrator, a little girl, gets to dress up, ride a bus with her grandmother, and visit her incarcerated father. Told from a child’s point of view, the story shows how children can have unconditional love for their parents, even

if a parent has made a mistake. The story does not criticize, but instead shows love, and any child who has been separated from a loved one can identify with the feelings of the narrator. The idea that all children have been or could be separated from a loved one is universal, and would be a starting point for discussion among the students. Using Woodson's book in a guidance lesson is a way to connect with children of incarcerated parents while at the same time, introducing the concept of parental incarceration to other children in the classroom.

One other bibliotherapy lesson to use in elementary classrooms would be Todd Parr's *The Family Book*. This book, written for young children, provides an introduction to an array of families. Interspersed with the differences among families are the ways they are alike, such as they all like to hug each other, are sad when they lose someone they love, enjoy celebrating special days together, and can help each other to be strong. Hugging and celebrating special days together would look very different in a family where a parent is incarcerated, and the counselor could use these differences to generate a discussion among the students. However, the idea is that these simple things happen regardless of the family situation and all children should respect other children's families. Parr's book celebrates the diversity of family groups and through this type of lesson, children would learn about a number of family situations and the need to accept all types of families.

Advocate, Consultant, and Coordinator

Timmons (2005) noted that it is also the counselor's role to advocate for these children by promoting the inclusion of books about parental incarceration for children in the school library. In addition, the counselor should conduct in-service training for teachers focusing on children of incarcerated parents so that all staff members develop their skills in working with specific populations of children. Finally, school counselors are frequently confronted with issues surrounding the temporary living arrangements of a child whose parents are incarcerated. The elementary school counselor can coordinate services for these children through such places as the child welfare system or with their remaining relatives.

Conclusion

A child's life is forever altered when a parent is incarcerated, and many children struggle emotionally, academically, psychologically, economically, and socially as a result. Without some form of support or intervention, children of incarcerated parents are five times more likely than other children to become incarcerated themselves. These children often experience anger, fear, sadness, loneliness, guilt, and low self-esteem. In addition, children of incarcerated parents frequently exhibit physical aggression, antisocial behaviors, disruptive school behaviors, and early crime involvement. The elementary school counselor can play a very important role with these children, working through such interventions

as asset building, skill development, small group, and individual work. This is an ever-growing population, and elementary school counselors must be prepared to work knowledgeably and effectively with these children.

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